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THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONVERSION.

ALL religious people believe in a new life as the condition of spiritual peace and contentment, of that tranquility of soul in which is supreme felicity. Whatever may be their philosophy of the matter, the substantial facts are evident. The predominance of desire over duty, of passion over principle, of impulse over disciplined character is before our eyes every day. The distance between the sinner and the saint, between the willful man and the man whose will is consecrated to universal ends, is a gulf which cannot be filled up by any rubbish of ordinary good sense. Many years ago, an extreme rationalist, a Unitarian of the school of Theodore Parker, an advanced transcendentalist, spoke of "sacrifice" as "the all-sufficing joy" in language glowing with emotion. Jonathan Edwards could not have surpassed in conviction this teacher of naturalism undisguised and triumphant. They who have thought much on the subject, have read what the theologians said, have pondered the texts of scripture, have looked at the commentaries, and have analyzed the processes of experience, are little wiser than the rest of mankind. When the professor in the divinity school taught us that the meaning of the Greek word *μετανοεω* — which the common version translates "Repent ye" — was exhausted by the rendering, "change your minds," a veil seemed to fall from before our eyes. The mystery was withdrawn. The whole "change" was reduced to the level of common experience. The process was a purely mental one, going on within the domain of intellect, and no more inexplicable than other modifications of thought. But a moment of reflection was enough to make it clear that this merely verbal suggestion threw no light into the recesses of the problem. Even Mr. Andrews Norton's substitution of the word "reform" for the language used in King James's version, did not help one out of the difficulty. Nothing is more incomprehensible than

the moral process of reformation. To change one's mind permanently and resolutely; to take a new view of human nature and human life, of Providence and duty, of the world of causes and affairs; to turn about and face in the opposite direction, is an altogether unaccountable thing. The consequences of it are momentous; the motive powers that lead to it are concealed. Why does anybody do it? How is the event brought about? The questions cannot be answered; the problem cannot be solved. Possibly, at some future time, when the spiritual laws are understood, when the modes of action in the nervous system are scientifically traced out, we shall be able to reach some rational conclusion on this subject. But at present we are in the dark. Evangelical doctrines do not bridge the chasm, or tell us why the lightning flash, the example, the book, the sermon, the word spoken in public or private, wrought such great effects in particular instances, while in other cases they were so utterly inoperative. The assumption of supernatural influence makes the matter no clearer. To jump at a theory is not to explain a fact. The efficient cause is as remote as ever. To say that God keeps his own counsel and does what he has a mind to, is simply to throw the mystery further back, and to evade a difficulty that cannot be confronted. No question is answered, and another theme is introduced no less intricate than the one immediately in hand. The abyss is simply deepened. Problem is heaped on problem, yet the original problem is as far from solution as before; if possible farther, for mystification is added to profundity.

"Draw, if thou canst, the mystic line,
Severing rightly his from thine,
Which is human, which divine."

The anxiety that is associated with this phase of religious experience has been made intense by the Protestant system of religion in which the present generation was instructed. This system swept away at a stroke the appliances by which the Church of Rome sought to effect a reconciliation between the soul and Christ, and substituted an inward experience for an outward observance. To make this consciousness vivid, it was necessary to present a sharp contrast between the state from which one was delivered and the state into which it was desirable that one should be brought. The merciful provision of purgatory was removed. The misery of the earthly lot was

exaggerated, the blessedness of heaven was exalted. The condition of the sinner was painted in the blackest colors. Horrors were heaped around the bed of death. Hell was made more dreadful, and was stretched over a larger expanse. Human nature was described as being utterly depraved. Human occupations were pronounced useless, if not worse than useless. Human virtue was suspected. The possibility of natural goodness was called in question. Motives were subjected to cruel suspicion under an assumption that

“The trail of the serpent was over them all.”

The devil was presumed to be active everywhere and to have a hand in all that transpired among men. The tempter was omnipresent, sure of the sinners, trying to get possession of the saints. There was no release from the duty of incessant vigilance. The business of introspection could not be suspended for a single moment. The soul was always diving into itself, taking itself to pieces, examining its own condition, debating whether it belonged to Christ or to Satan, doubting whether it was a candidate for heaven or for hell. The wound of sin was kept ever open. It was impossible to forget. To be glad was impious. To be easy-going, natural, careless, gay, was wicked. Animal spirits were proof of guilt. There was no instinctive happiness, no spontaneous felicity, however much appearances might indicate the contrary. This old-fashioned analysis of motives may be correct; possibly there may be no such thing as pure disinterestedness in the world (though some cases occur which look astonishingly like it, as for example the conduct of the chief engineer of the “State of Florida,” and the heroic behavior of responsible sailors at wrecks); but this need not trouble us if we dismiss the notion of a standard of supernatural excellence, and of the final condemnation of all who do not attain it. So long as our estimates of virtue are based on visible facts no confusion need ensue; it is only when it becomes a pious duty to discredit entirely human goodness that one demurs.

Such overstatements as have been mentioned, with others like them, are unavoidable. They are simply essential to render startling the opposition between nature and grace. This is not the place to enter into metaphysical or theological discussions, or to give a history of opinions; but it is timely to say that such exaggerations cloud the issue they pretend to elucidate. They

raise many queries, but answer none. To speak of proving an overstrained doctrine is to misapprehend the point presented. That it is overstrained is evidence of its unreasonableness. It cannot be maintained that religious men, without regard to their race or creed, entertain the "evangelical" faith in regard to conversion. The argument from scripture is vitiated by several considerations. The assumption of scriptural infallibility is fatal to it at the outset. The fact that scripture texts are differently interpreted vitally affects the immediate question. The circumstance that theological prepossessions may determine the meaning attached to texts—that the reader's thought may be imposed upon passages in the Bible, is of prime importance in getting at the true sense, for to take for granted the truth of theological opinions is to prejudge the whole case under debate. The appeal to consciousness is unavailing, for the simple reason that there can be no consciousness except of what is in the mind at any particular moment. The sinner cannot be conscious of the experiences of the saint, or the saint of those of the sinner; and neither can be conscious of the passage from one condition to the other. Besides, the consciousness of both sinner and saint may be artificial, the misery of the former, the ecstasy of the latter being magnified to meet the requirements of the creed, which must not be received in advance of demonstration. The natural feelings of men have been so completely overlaid that it is impossible to discover them. Not until one puts aside frankly and altogether the Protestant idea of a sharp, essential antagonism between the "natural" and the "spiritual" man, can one arrive at a scientific estimate of the value of moral conduct; and this implies a radical change in the method of judging character, an absolute rejection of the cardinal principles which underlie the Protestant system of religion as well as of theology.

The Roman Catholic theory is more gracious to human nature. Of course it starts from the same points. The perfection of Adam before the Fall, the inspiration of scripture, the need of supernatural grace, the contrast between nature and spirit, are all accepted as first truths, beyond denial or dispute. But this being conceded, the doctrine of conversion is more reasonable. There is more definition, more qualification, more allowance of psychological facts, a closer approximation of natural and supernatural goodness, an extension of the time of probation, an increase of the "means of grace," an absence of the

prying curiosity, which is the great tormenting feature in the Protestant system. Its inquisition, however fiendish, is not spiritual, nor are its visible flames as cruel as the self-torturing fires that Protestants kindle and exult in as tests of the spiritual life. Has one duly considered such agonies as John Bunyan—to name a man whom all have heard of—encountered? This kind of *auto da fé* Romanism does not encourage; and is, so far, in accord with a rational view of goodness.

The Council of Trent declared that man preserved all his natural powers after the Fall, having lost the benefit of the divine grace only; that free will remained, “not wholly extinct, though weakened and bowed down.” “All men lost innocence by Adam’s prevarication.” Anselm taught that original sin consisted in the privation of righteousness; Augustine, that its essence was concupiscence. Saint Thomas Aquinas, on the whole, agreed with Anselm, and maintained that concupiscence alone was not sin, but must be joined with unrighteousness—that is, with evil purpose—to constitute sin. Aquinas, too, contended that natural happiness was possible to unbaptized infants. Romanism did not proscribe the pursuits or the pleasures of this world, but in as far as they were simply natural, smiled on them. In a word, man was left as he was, it being assumed that by supernatural aid alone could he attain his full stature as a “spiritual” creature, or enter into cordial communion with God. The Romanist insists on human inability, on the shortness of man’s tether, on the limitations to all mortal endeavor; and this is an enormous concession, bringing the Catholic doctrine very near to what a scientific psychology will regard as the truth of the case, namely, the imbecility of the will under ordinary motives. Extraordinary motives cannot, as yet, be accounted for, and may be dismissed, at present, from the strictly rational view. That, under existing circumstances, average human nature cannot be expected to rise into transcendent heights of virtue may be admitted. At the same time, at any moment influences may be excited that will lift commonplace characters to the mountain-tops of excellence. It is usually supposed that such influences come only or chiefly to believers in the Christ, to members of the church, to disciples of the accepted creed; but this supposition is altogether gratuitous, inasmuch as those who discard the creed entirely feel the emotions described by the converted who have “experienced religion.” People, extraor-

dinary people perhaps, who belong to no religious communion in or out of Christendom, in their philosophy and in their lives attest the reality of interior states of spiritual ecstasy. All people, whether gifted or not in other respects, may enjoy, more or less habitually, these transports, which, whatever be their true explanation, are certainly independent of ecclesiastical and of doctrinal antecedents.

Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his lecture on "Worship," uses the following language :

"Every man takes care that his neighbor shall not cheat him. But a day comes when he begins to care that he do not cheat his neighbor. Then all goes well. He has changed his market-cart into a chariot of the sun. What a day dawns when we have taken to heart the doctrine of faith! to prefer, as a better investment, being to doing, being to becoming, logic to rhythm and to display, the year to the day, the life to the year, character to performance, and have come to know that justice will be done us; and if our genius is slow, the term will be long."

The same writer, in the lecture on "Fate," says :

"The revelation of thought takes man out of servitude into freedom. We rightly say of ourselves, we were born, and then we were born again, and many times. We have successive experiences so important that the new forgets the old, and hence the mythology of the seven or the nine heavens. The day of days, the great day of the feast of life, is that in which the inward eye opens to the unity in things, to the omnipresence of law; sees that what is must be and ought to be, or is the best. This beatitude dips from on high down on us, and we see. It is not in us so much as we are in it. If the air come to our lungs, we breathe and live; if not, we die. If the light come to our eyes, we see; else not. And if truth come to our mind, we suddenly expand to its dimensions, as if we grew to worlds. We are as lawgivers; we speak for nature, we prophesy and divine."

Mr. James Parton, a man of different mental constitution from Mr. Emerson, a man who breathes a different intellectual atmosphere, in his biography of Benjamin Franklin, has a chapter entitled, "Regeneration," in which he discusses his subject's spiritual condition, and gives his own explanation of it. Dr. Franklin, as we all know, was not a saint. He was not what might be called an angelic man. He was not a church member. He was by no means "evangelical" in his belief. As a youth he was a deist, nor is it probable that he ever wholly discarded the belief of the unbelievers. The litany that he composed at the age of twenty-two does not read in the least like the litany

of the Episcopal Church. But he lived in the main according to rational principles, soberly, sedately, continently, humanely. He preferred reason to impulse. His was a life of usefulness and of service to his fellow-men, not an emotional or ecstatic life (his temperament did not allow that), not a life of interior joy, not a life of contemplation or of spiritual experience; but an honest, well-intentioned, high-purposed life, pitched on an elevated key. I think we should have reason to congratulate ourselves if the majority of men were as good as he was, were actuated by motives as generous and noble, were so enlightened in their self-love.

Is not this the substance of the matter? Do not Mr. Emerson's words convey the entire truth? Allowing for differences of temperament and susceptibility in men, and for various modes of expressing the same feeling, can we declare that the supremacy of reason over instinct is not all that is essential to the doctrine of conversion? And if imagination be added to intelligence, have we not all the conditions of vital experience? If the whole be suffused with emotion, a state of transport is possible. The history of St. Charles or of St. Francis might easily be reproduced among infidels, for all the higher degrees of conviction are included in such supremacy. There is heroism in it; there may be martyrdom. Self-forgetfulness, self-denial, self-crucifixion follow, each in its order, each according to disposition. The delight of consecration belongs to those who know it. The vision of the saint is within the reach of expectation. This faith in reason lends wings to the feet, and bears men toward the empyrean. Let a man begin by paying his debts, and he will never end. Before he has paid all his debts, his debts of honor, of love, of gratitude, he will be ripe for canonization. We shall have to tie weights to his ankles in order to hold him down to the earth. It may be thought that the majority of mankind would not attain to any degree of this high state without the aid of their present religious belief. But the majority of mankind do not attain to it, as it is; do not try to attain to it, do not believe in it, rather doubt the desirableness of being insane after this fashion, more than doubt if any such condition of experience is attainable by rational means; and it might be well to drive believers from their refuges into the open air of rationalism, which is, at least, bracing and wholesome. It is something to know one's deficiencies; it is commonly the first step toward

any moral advance. The faith that hides people from themselves is no advantage; it may, on the contrary, be a grave disadvantage, even to such as have nothing else.

Is not this an illustration of the value of substance over form? The Church of Rome, trusting to its seven sacraments, which covered the whole expanse of human life and were presumed to convey the supernatural grace of God, was satisfied when people joined its communion, availed themselves of its aid, went to mass, attended confession, performed such other ecclesiastical duties as were required, and, beyond the probing of the confessional, was not disposed to make inquisition into the interior state of the soul. This left the natural bent of the constitution comparatively free to follow its own destiny. The danger was lest people who had little spiritual aspiration might think they had made effort enough when they had gone through the prescribed round of exercises, and might give rein to their animal propensities without remorse or shame, taking for granted their security in the possession of the good offices of the church. This peril was exemplified in the private history of even popes and priests, to say nothing of ordinary men and women. The Protestant churches, urging the necessity of personal faith in the Redeemer, stimulated to the utmost every tendency toward religious elevation, and made the most of every heavenward wish; but they incurred the risk of confounding natural with spiritual impulses, of promoting a morbid habit of self-examination, of persuading saints that they were sinners and sinners that they were saints, and of thereby inflicting hideous sufferings on sensitive spirits. These dangers have been frequently indicated, so that it is unnecessary to dwell on them here, and everybody who is at all familiar with the biography of either ministers or laymen has had abundant evidence of the reality of them. The earlier Unitarians were too incessantly occupied with controversial questions to formulate any definite belief on this subject; but they were good Protestants in substance, and had no doubt in regard to the need of divine grace for carnal men. Their tendency, however, though they did not suspect it, was toward naturalism; and when this was arrived at, under the name of transcendentalism, an effort was made to extract from simple human nature all spiritual possibilities, and to substitute development for conversion, moral progress for moral regeneration, the spontaneous unfolding of the soul for its creation by

superhuman forces, allowing temperament to color experience. There were no such enthusiasts for spiritual perfection as the transcendentalists. They were persuaded that the highest attainment was within the reach of every-day humanity, and they persevered in their faith in spite of tremendous discouragements.

The danger, for an instant, seemed to be from an excessive enthusiasm. There was enthusiasm, even fanaticism, in the Romish Church, but it was confined to a small number of sensitive souls who were excited by the promise of celestial felicity. Protestantism, taking religious exaltation out of the domain of natural impulse and limiting it to an elect few, confined within a small compass the explosive forces of the overheated mind. The safest organization in christendom is probably the Episcopal Church, for it is a combination of what is best in the Romish and Protestant systems, and in it is applied a gentle heat like that which Sir Kenelm Digby thought so efficacious in awakening to life the ashes of flowers. I allude, especially, to the so-called "Broad Church," whose welcome to every kind of culture, whose indifference to the current topics of theology, and whose spiritual conception of the Christ entitle it to be ranked among the educators of the generation. The stimulus applied to human nature by the first transcendentalists led immediately to enterprises for the reconstruction of society that were characterized rather by zeal than by wisdom, the history whereof is written in many books, the noise whereof filled the air forty years ago. Since then that enthusiasm has died away. The new doctrine was too subtle for the average intellect to grasp, the new demand was too lofty for the average conscience to meet, and an ebbing tide is visible where formerly the channels were full. The "Religion of Humanity" now threatens us with a species of fanaticism under another shape, namely, that of self-immolation in the service of mankind. The theory of "altruism"—the devotion to others—points directly to sacrifice as the duty of the individual, and inflames the dispositions of the generous of heart. But the generous of heart are not many, and this impulse is soon spent.

The temptation, however, is almost irresistible to compress "humanity" within the lines of a particular era, to make a short episode in the history of a country identical with the moral experiences of the race, and to confound an incidental

administration of affairs with the permanent order of a government; hence an accession of passionate feeling that would be impossible to any broad, historical view. In the immensities of time all convulsions die speedily away, and an infinite calm reigns over the surface of the great deep; but they who attempt to navigate the shallows are exposed to tempests. Reading Stepniak's "Underground Russia" I was deeply impressed by the heroism of the men and women whose conduct is described there. These were people who regarded all religion as a degrading superstition, who believed in neither immortality nor God, who held no high ideal of personal attainment in this world, who were not mystics or dreamers of any sort, but were simply disciples of an absolute nothingness; yet they manifested a power of consecration greater than the sainted Romans displayed, thus proving again, if more proof were needed, that the grand qualities of the hero and the saint are independent of creed. The narrower these Nihilists were, the more intense was their earnestness, the more consecrated and deadly their resolves. The broad stream flows slowly, but may be navigated. The compressed water is too violent to be crossed by boat or swimmer.

But there are exceptions to the general rule of apathy which prevails among mankind at large. It cannot be said that the majority of men are fanatics or enthusiasts. How to stir the inert mind of the community is still the problem; how to set the multitude thinking, how to bring in the day when one cares that he do not cheat his neighbor, and so may change his market-cart into a chariot of the sun. The Church of Rome has done what it could through the fidelity of its priests, the eloquence of its divines, the examples of its holy men and women; the Protestant churches have made prodigious efforts through their preachers and pastors, and through the energy of "revivals." But all this is of very little efficacy, to say nothing of the strained, unnatural character of the improvement gained. The object to which the modern world bends its efforts is the elevation by rational, human means of the ordinary faculties of mankind, the calm, steady, serene progress of society. This process of education is going forward faster than most suspect. The consciousness of imperfection, the painful sense of imbecility, the craving for increased opportunity, the demand for more privilege, are symptoms of a general discontent pointing

to fresh reformatations. The aspect of human misery, the bitter struggle for existence on the part of large numbers in every town, the feeling of injustice on the part of many, are acting as sharp spurs to produce a change of moral as well as of material condition. The spread of education, the diffusion of intelligence by the press, the multiplication of libraries, add every year to the sum of mental forces, and increase the balance of mind over matter. The practical knowledge required in the useful arts, the economies demanded in the home, the growing sentiment of repugnance toward intemperance, the diminishing power of vice in influential quarters are all signs of a rising humanity. Art is becoming an ideal element. The study of science is interesting the people. The opening of galleries and gardens will, in due time, shut up a great number of dram-shops. A taste for unseen things will, it may be hoped, one of these days, extend from the cultivated class to the uneducated. One may even anticipate the era of religious exaltation, when the solemn order of the universe, the procession of law, the absolute reign of harmony, the power of wisdom and love in great souls, will fascinate living minds and touch spiritual natures that are now asleep. Should that hour ever arrive we shall hear less of "conversion" and more of advancement; less of "supernatural grace," but more of the natural possibilities of man to arrive at the highest states.

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